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Save the Watergate reforms

It was ten years ago, on June 17, 1972, that night watchman Frank Wills made the fateful discovery of adhesive tape stuck on basement doors of the Watergate complex in Washington that led to the greatest US constitutional challenge in this century. The cover-up that grew out of what the White House at first called an inconsequential burglary eventually toppled a president, brought the imprisonment of key officials, and — most important — triggered a broad range of reform legislation that imposed sharp new standards of ethics on government service while restricting the office of the presidency itself.

In Watergate, the American system, with its built-in checks and balances, and vigorous freedom of speech and press, worked. That is not to be taken lightly. Given the fact that the United States in the latter days of this century is becoming an increasingly computerized, technological society — with more awesome methods of public manipulation and intelligence-gathering activities, available than were ever dreamed up in the Washington of the early 1970s — Watergate becomes a stark and useful reminder that such abuses of power must never again be allowed to occur.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, many of the specific reforms enacted after Watergate are now under attack — in part based on the argument that the office of the presidency has been dangerously weakened by the reform moves.

Some of the reforms have obviously proven unwieldy. The congressional budget act, for example, as recent weeks have shown, has not proven effective in ensuring that lawmakers and the White House produce a budget within their required time frame. In the long run, given the threat of spiraling deficits, the American public must hold Congress to its own legislative mandate regarding the budget process.

The whole matter of ending abuses regarding campaign finances has also proven complicated. Thanks to public financing, presidential elections are cleaner than ever, at least regarding money. That is hardly the case with congressional elections. Because of political action committees, campaign dollars are pouring into the coffers of lawmakers and would-be lawmakers. Americans need to find a way to ensure that the voices of individuals in elections are not drowned out by well-heeled business, labor, or other special-interest groups.

Some Watergate reforms have amply proven their value. The War Powers Act has most likely inhibited presidents from engag-

ing in unpopular or unnecessary interventions abroad. The special prosecutor law is clearly as relevant now as when first passed, given, for example, the need to investigate serious allegations that Labor Secretary Raymond Donovan was involved with organized crime figures prior to accepting his current position.

Three reforms are under severe attack. In each case, the public would seem ill-served by major revision of existing laws:

- **Freedom of information.** The Reagan administration, concerned about national security, has already been making it somewhat easier for federal agencies to withhold information. Yet, it is precisely the existence of such legislation that prevents a government, of whatever political cast, from easily hiding a political scandal behind the trappings of "security" or any other deceptive cover.

- **Antibribery legislation.** Efforts are underway to dilute the legislation that prevents American firms from making illegal payoffs abroad. The US must maintain an irreproachable standard in this area.

- **Intelligence agencies.** Restrictions on US intelligence agencies have made those institutions more accountable. But the security vs. openness debate is back in full swing. At the same time, the administration has enlarged the domestic spying role of the CIA. Congress has passed a bill making it illegal to identify a US intelligence agent, even if the information was found in public records. Late last week the legislation was sent to President Reagan for signing.

Maintaining a balance between strict accountability for spy agencies and enough secrecy protection to allow necessary intelligence work is always difficult. Yet such a balance is essential if freedoms are to be preserved.

Finally, the press must take a hard look at its role following Watergate. Few Americans would deny that the press has an obligation to ferret out corruption, inefficiency, and duplicity. But if the press is to preserve its reputation for integrity and fairness, each news organization also has a responsibility to prevent the type of lapses into sensationalism that have sometimes been justified in the name of "investigative" reporting.

Each generation, according to former Sen. Sam Ervin, who was chairman of the Senate Watergate Committee, must "learn its own lessons." The Watergate generation learned much about public responsibility — and the potential threat to liberty. Those lessons should not be limited to one generation. They should continue to benefit American society.